



Hermann Lotze (1817-1881)

1. Preface: Philosophy before modernism

Rudolph *Hermann* Lotze reigned as the single most influential philosopher in Germany during his life and for some considerable time after. Lotze's actual technique involved a particular dialectic, one which while attempting to give consideration to each side of a seeming antinomy, resolves ultimately in favour for one side, albeit one which is fundamentally transformed. Accordingly, Lotze's work looks both forward and backward, anticipating both methods and the emphases of the new philosophical spirit while clinging, nonetheless, to certain key assumptions of the very romantic *Weltanschauung* that he helped to undo.



2. Life: Philosophy of biology

Lotze officially began as a student of medicine and, after attaining a doctorate in philosophy, he quickly followed with a degree in medicine, awarded for his dissertation *De futurae biologiae principibus philosophicis* (1838). Then he commenced other medically-oriented works, including his *Allgemeine Pathologie und Therapie als mechanische Naturwissenschaften*, *Allgemeine Physiologie des Körperlichen Lebens* (1851), and *Medicinische Psychologie, oder Physiologie der Seele* (1852). Lotze's output - in and around the *Vörmärz* - showed a continuing preoccupation with both the theory and application of the biological sciences in medicine, physiology and psychology. But it is within this same time period that Lotze made a fateful contribution, one later portrayed by Lange as his "involuntary service to materialism." (Of course, from similar premises, Lotze drew sharply different conclusions than the materialistic thinkers he inadvertently inspired.) This "service" was his trenchant attack on the concept of "vital force" [*Lebenskraft*], widely held by a variety of thinkers of differing orientations to have struck the decisive blow.

3. Space: Philosophy of psychology

The Lotzean soul functions as "a genuine stable point"; thus, as a substantial and self-determining principle of unity in consciousness, it is the functional equivalent of Kant's "transcendental unity of apperception." The soul is further "the abiding source of sensation [i.e., cognition], of feeling [i.e., of emotion], of effort [i.e., volition]". But it is also, Lotze emphasized in contradistinction to Kant, always a particular, embodied consciousness, living entwined in concrete and manifold relatedness. Further, the soul is insofar as it lives. Indeed, one interpreter goes as far as to suggest that Lotze embraced a "phenomenological" - rather than a traditional "metaphysical" - notion of the soul, citing the striking utterance: "*Insofern ist der Name der Seele ein phaenomologischer Ausdruck*".



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4. Thought: Logic and language

Lotze resolutely refused the mantle of “the theory of knowledge” for a simple but compelling reason: what went under that title in the 1850s and 1860s was a psycho-physiological investigation, and some early figures in the neo-Kantian revival (prominently, Helmholtz and Lange) construed the Müllerian doctrine of “specific nerve energies” as positive proof of the Kantian emphasis on the contributions of transcendental subjectivity in our apprehension of objects.

Lotze’s actual contributions to the emergence of *Sprachphilosophie* were generally unappreciated, if not ignored altogether. This is strange for although, by mid-century, many different theoretical approaches to the study of language were available, Lotze was undoubtedly the most important of the mainstream academic philosophers at that time to turn attention to this topic. In his *Microcosmus*, Lotze devoted numerous pages to the connection he hoped to help establish between language and thought.

Lotze denies that language is primarily a phonemic enterprise, insisting instead that there is a dual dependence between language and thought: language cannot exist without there being meanings [*Bedeutungen*] correlated to its words and yet thought also relies directly upon the syntactic abilities of a given natural language to provide the basic form by which apprehension may take place.

For Lotze, the merely accidental associations of ideas do not - and cannot - constitute thought. The animal mind is capable of linking associations but it can neither explain nor justify these perceived connections. Thus, the three linguistic forms of ‘substantive’, ‘adjective’ and ‘verb’ are required to express thought’s apprehension of ‘objects’, ‘properties’, and ‘relations’. And for such formative purposes, syntax is critical, not sound. This is because “thought cannot directly make use of sensations, feelings, moods, simple or complex images, as materials for its structure”.

5. Being: Metaphysics

Any post-Kantian discussion of the relation of thought to being must come to grips with Kant’s rigid bifurcation between phenomenal appearance and noumenal reality. Of course, without strict adherence to this distinction, Kant’s own position would collapse into Berkleyan phenomenalism. Accordingly, post-Kantians such as Herbart, who wanted to maintain a strong realism, had to rethink this central feature of Kantian metaphysics. But while Herbart maintained the possibility of some relation between noumena and phenomena, Lotze went further in dissociating the two; hence, Lotze was led to oppose the notion of a single unchangeable substance lying at the base of the thing and constituting its essence. Yet Lotze assumed that changes at the phenomenal level must reflect changes at the noumenal, and he persisted in the belief that although appearance is not like reality it does, nevertheless, provide knowledge of reality. Additionally, the notion of being favoured by Kant (and his realistic disciple Herbart) rested in the belief that the meaning of existence *simpliciter* could be captured in the formulation “absolute position.”



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Lotze finesses the problem of causality by replacing it with the notion of ground, or logical consequence. He is led to this conception by, among other things, the difficulties associated with the notion of metaphysical or *transeunt* causality.

To this end, Lotze utilizes Humean-style arguments, without thereby concurring with Humean conclusions (in particular Hume's radical psychologism). If Hume dissolved causality into a mental predisposition - a psychological expectation of uniformity - then Lotze reduced it, instead, to the efficient causality found in a regularly occurring sequence, which expresses a rule or law.

6. Persons: Value theory

Lotze's monism stands opposed to Herbart's earlier pluralistic atomism. His re-description of causality likewise coheres with his prior conviction that there must exist a human soul endowed with freedom of the will. Accordingly, Lotze encourages us to think of the world as the product of the will of God, of an infinite spirit: Reality is, hence, that which corresponds to self-consciousness. But is this particular self-consciousness or spirit, which we may identify with the absolute, also personal in nature? Our first impulse yields a negative response simply because personality normally is associated with the notion of fixed limits (which would, of course, be inappropriate in an infinite, unlimited being). And yet Lotze contends that we must conceive of God as the preeminent personality and so, once again, God's own personality is "an immediate certainty," grasped only as a necessity of the human mind.

Further, Lotze's peculiar investigations into morality provide yet another case study in Lotzean dialectic. Moral rules cannot be understood as merely prudential maxims or as essentially self-regarding in nature: Moral principles must possess an "intrinsic worth." However, this fact should not catapult us into either a mystical or religious position on the one hand, or the "empty formalism" of Kantianism on the other. For both utilitarians and egoists are correct when they insist upon the necessary presence of pleasure and pain (as concrete content) in moral deliberation. But to escape such subjective egoism in morality is possible only if we shift our perspective by changing "our conception of our personality and its position in the world". Characteristically, our untutored convictions suggest the idea that moral laws express and embody the will of God.

Likewise, our will expresses its moral nature in the ability to freely choose between competing values, without compulsion. But this choice is always rooted in a *concrete* reality - *our feeling*, for instance, that truth is rightfully to be pursued *because it is good*.

7. Afterword: Beyond naturalism and historicism

Lotze's main contributions are evidenced in the emergence of what others have dubbed "the neo-Kantian paradigm". This philosophical approach provides the shared backdrop against which the analytic-continental



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split emerges. Particularly important for both Frege and Husserl, Lotze's influence extends partly via the British Idealists.

Understanding and incorporating the insights and achievements of the twentieth century return us, perforce, to their roots in the prior century. But so long as the nineteenth century remains “still the most obscure of all the centuries of the modern age up to now”, even the true significance of our present endeavours may remain yet unknown and unknowable to us. The only alternative is blank incomprehension, the sort already possible within about fifty years of his death; for when Wittgenstein's student Drury complained about the inclusion of Lotze as a special author in the second part of his *Triplos*, Wittgenstein could only reply: “Probably a man who shouldn't have been allowed to write philosophy”.

Source: Adapted from:

- [Wikipedia article on Lotze](#) [incorporating material from the 1911 *Encyclopedia Britannica* entry]
- [Biographisch-Bibliographisches Kirchenlexicon article](#), including extensive bibliography [in German]



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